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Robert Welch Jr. Dead at 85; Leader of John Birch Society

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN

Robert H. W. Welch Jr., the founder and patriarch of the John Birch Society, died Sunday at the Winchester Nursing Home in Winchester, Mass. He was 85 years old and had been in poor health since suffering a stroke in 1983.

Mr. Welch, who spent most of his adult life in the candy business, led the ultraconservative anti-Communist John Birch Society for 25 years, from its inception in 1958 until March 1983, when he stepped down as president and became chairman emeritus.

A voluble, gregarious man with restless blue eyes and a fringe of white hair, Mr. Welch was, for thousands of Americans in the 1950's and 1960's, a prophet with a vision of mortal danger in what he said was a Communist conspiracy to infiltrate Government, schools, business, the arts and other facets of national life.

It Waned After 1960's

Many Americans, however, regarded Mr. Welch and his followers as misguided extremists who themselves represented a threat to American freedoms. After the 1960's the size and influence of the society began to wane.

In recent years, as Mr. Welch's involvement declined, the society maintained a low profile — some members say it did so deliberately — and found itself at odds with many conservatives, including President Reagan, whom Mr. Welch once called a "lackey" of Communist conspirators.

Robert Henry Winborne Welch Jr. was born on Dec. 1, 1899, on a farm in Chowan County, N.C. He learned to read at the age of 3, finished high school at 12 and graduated from the University of North Carolina at 17.

He later studied for two years at the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, and spent two years in law school at Harvard. Disillusioned with academia, he quit Harvard in 1921 and founded a company that made fudge in a loft in Cambridge, Mass.

The company prospered and in 1932 he joined the staff of E. J. Brach & Sons, at that time the nation's largest confectionery. Two years later he became sales manager for the James O. Welch Company, his younger brother's Massachusetts-based candy manufacturing concern. Under Mr. Welch's direction, the business grew from

\$200,000 in sales in 1935 to \$20 million in 1956.

He ran for political office only once, campaigning unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor of Massachusetts in 1950. In the 1950's, Mr. Welch founded a conservative magazine, *One Man's Opinion*, and traveled widely, acquiring a growing belief in the existence of an international Communist conspiracy.

To combat the dangers he perceived, Mr. Welch retired after more than 30 years in the candy business. At a two-day meeting in Indianapolis with 11 other men in December 1958, he founded the John Birch Society, which he dedicated to the goals of "less government, more individual responsibility and a better world."

The society was named after an American intelligence officer killed by the Chinese Communists 10 days after World War II, a man described by Mr. Welch as the "first casualty" of the cold war. The society quickly attracted national attention and a limited but devoted following.

On the strength of what he called "an accumulation of evidence," Mr. Welch called President Eisenhower "a dedicated, conscious agent" of the Communist conspiracy. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Allen W. Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence, and others were accused of being members of the Communist underground.

Mr. Welch advocated the impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren, repeal of the income tax, withdrawal of the United States from the United Nations, abolition of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, cessation of cultural and other contacts with the Soviet Union and restrictions on collective bargaining.

He also called for an end of all civil rights programs, which he called a cover for Communism.

The size and influence of the society peaked in the mid-1960's, when it had nearly 100,000 members in clubs around the nation; a budget of \$8 million a year and 270 paid employees, many of them working out of a headquarters in Belmont, Mass.; a book publishing house; two monthly publications; a speakers' bureau; a radio program and 400 Birch-owned bookstores.



The New York Times, 1967

Robert Welch

Clamor over the society's influence reached a crescendo at the time of the 1964 Republican National Convention, when Senator Barry Goldwater, accepting the Presidential nomination, proclaimed "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice" and "moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue."

As the society's fortunes began to fade, its leaders became divided over tactics, strategy and goals; members were accused of disrupting school boards, harassing city councils and librarians and otherwise using unfair tactics against opponents, and Mr. Welch was accused of smears and character assassination.

Mr. Welch, a courtly man who delighted in intellectual discussions, insisted that he never indiscriminately called people Communists or Communist sympathizers.

His assertions about President Eisenhower, originally issued in a memorandum and expanded into an 80,000-word biographical document published in 1958 as "The Politician," later became a persistent problem for society spokesmen.

In 1961, in a clarification for the press, Mr. Welch denied having accused Mr. Eisenhower and others of being Communists. "They were being used by Communists," he said. "I never said they were Communists and I don't say it now."

Mr. Welch is survived by his wife, the former Marian Lucille Probert, whom he married in 1922; two sons, Hillard Walmer and Robert 3d, and six grandchildren.